DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 122 261 CS 002 624

AUTHOR Brown, James I.
TITLE Efficient Reading Courses for College Students.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (21st, Anaheim, California, May 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Critical Reading; *Developmental Reading; Post Secondary Education; Reading Comprehension; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Interests; *Reading Programs; *Speed Reading; Student Attitudes; Student Motivation

ABSTRACT

An efficient reading skills course may be considered one of the most important reading courses a college student takes since it may be the last reading course taken; it may be a last chance to develop high-level reading proficiency. The instructor of such a course should keep in mind both the immediate scholastic improvement goals of the the students and their after-college needs. The attitudes and self-concepts of each individual student must be evaluated. Ideas which may become mental blocks to reading improvement need to be explored. For example, to enlist maximum student involvement from students who are convinced that rate improvement is the most important aspect of reading, instruction in rate improvement may be conducted initially, while the importance of vocabulary and comprehension are dealt with next. The reading process employed by each student should be analyzed and utilized in class instruction (e.g., Is the student an excellent scanner, but a poor study type reader?). The application of reading skills to lifelong reading habits should be emphasized, and increased reading interest should be an important objective of efficient reading courses. (MKM)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED122261

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

James I. Brown
University of Minnesota
Department of Rhetoric
St. Paul, Minnesota 55101

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

James I. Brown

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

EFFICIENT READING COURSES

FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

To be presented Wednesday, May 12, 1976, at 10:45 in the Grand Hotel, Off Broadway West, in the session, Developing Better Readers at the College Level

CS 002 624

In one sense, the college efficient reading course is the most important reading course a student takes. Why? Because it is probably his last chance to develop high-level reading proficiency. And it is our last chance to provide professional help and guidance. To be sure, there are adult courses in efficient reading, but few students who take the course in college repeat it later on. That means that students have to get through the remainder of their lives with the reading skills, habits, and interests cultivated in large part in that last college reading course.

That long-range view suggest one characteristic above all others as essential to the ideal efficient reading course. That is the quality of breadth. It is here, however, that student and teacher objectives tend to dichotomize. All too often students take the course with an immediate, relatively narrow goal in mind--help with their current reading assignments, better grades, and a reduction of time pressure. Reading as an indispensable tool for the remainder of life is likely to be overlooked almost entirely. That means that as teachers if we are to provide proper breadth, we must keep both in-college and after-college needs in balance.

Within that setting, efficient reading courses are perhaps best considered under three headings--the student, the reading process, and the application.

The Student

In teaching efficient reading it is easy to become so involved with specifics that we lose sight of the one factor of overriding concern.

We can spend weeks in planning how best to help students get central ideas, or draw accurate generalizations, or make effective use of context, to name but a few of the many key concerns which make up what is called efficient reading.

Then something happens to bring the realization that, in a sense, no one can teach efficient reading. We can only teach--students. That's why students come first in this analysis. And all students have an amazing variety of set notions, mental blocks and barriers, which stand invisibly between them and progress. These provide the chief reason why we have to teach students, not subject matter.

For example, it would seem quite safe to assume that every student who signed up for the efficient reading course was strongly interested in learning to read more rapidly. But even this safest of assumptions is not always so. I remember well one plodding reader I had. After two weeks in the course, he had increased his rate from only 170 to 190 wpm, with 30 per cent comprehension. After class I suggested that he try a faster rate. He shook his head and patiently explained that he got very little comprehension when he read slowly and would get nothing if he read any faster. With those words, his invisible mental block became all too apparent. Before learning could take place, that had to be eliminated.

But that's only one of the countless mental blocks which have to be dealt with. It seems almost a fundamental law that if a student does not progress well it is because he has a subconscious hidden desire which is in opposition--and stronger--than his original desire to improve. A primary task, then, of the teacher of efficient reading is to help each student resolve such conflicts. For unless they are resolved, the student is almost

powerless to move ahead effectively, since, in a sense, he is at odds with himself.

It is of the utmost importance, therefore, to structure efficient reading courses around the student's strongest felt need or needs. This minimizes mental blocks and insures maximum student involvement and application. Such needs are soon apparent. For example, when students from sections of Efficient Reading were asked "which of the following deserves most emphasis--comprehension, speed, or vocabulary," sixty-five per cent put speed first, more than the other two combined.

Such figures suggest that students are probably more interested in a speed reading course than in an efficient reading course. But speed reading, with its single emphasis on rate, lacks the breadth of efficient reading, with its usual three-fold emphasis on rate, comprehension, and vocabulary development.

To enlist maximum student involvement, we should put speed first where students place it, with comprehension and vocabulary fitted into place as key supporting factors. Students can be reminded of research findings[1] which indicate that vocabulary--word sense and word discrimination--contributes more (51%) to reading speed than any other known factor. Or students can be encouraged to draw from their own experience. Give them something more difficult to read. Let them see for themselves how word difficulty slows them down.

That choice between research or experience touches on a matter of particular consequence in instruction. Each student has a self-image which is either an asset or a liability. A teacher of efficient reading

has, as a major task, the building of a positive self-image which will facilitate maximum reading growth. Research by Rosenthal[2] on self-fulfillment prophesy has pointed up the importance of teacher image on student accomplishment.

Mental blocks are often set up unknowingly by the teacher. For example, if a teacher is firmly convinced, say, that 800 wpm is the top speed at which anyone can read, students will obligingly tend to fit themselves into that limited pattern.

This was brought home dramatically one quarter when a colleague taught one of three sections for the class hour focused on skimming. He used the identical lesson plan used in the other two sections, including the identical skimming practice problems for developing skimming speed and accuracy. Through oversight he was not told what results to expect. Normally in one class period, students develop an average skimming speed above 15,000 wpm with excellent accuracy.

My colleague spoke glowingly of how well his section, with an average speed of 2,161 wpm, had performed. It was easy to tell from listening to him that he felt they had reached an upper skimming limit. Unintentionally, he had limited their performances drastically.

The Reading Process

What is reading? More specifically, what is efficient reading? That question requires book treatment not just paragraph treatment. Reading, as thinking, despite all kinds of research, contains far too many unsolved mysteries. The path from perceiving symbols on the printed page to decoding

them in the brain is indeed a controversy strewn, complex path. With students, however, a heuristic pragmatic-oriented approach will avoid most controversy, leading them to their own conclusions, as well as providing them with a more open-minded attitude.

Think back to the student who fears to increase his rate because of an expected loss of comprehension. Just telling him to read faster does little to provide the assurance needed for progress. Use a heuristic approach. Ask him to graph his results in reading ten assigned readings, each somewhat faster than the preceding. Ask him to discover for himself, within as wide a rate range as possible, the relationship between rate and comprehension. Generalizations from such explorations usually lead to the conclusion that, within limits, the faster one reads the better one comprehends. By and large this is a typical heuristic assignment, to help students develop added confidence and arrive at a new point of view toward reading rate. They can see more clearly that they need added experience at speeds beyond their present limit to extend their ability to comprehend at faster rates.

In keeping with the key concept of breadth, a second crucial area in the process of reading focuses on knowing and using effectively such specialized reading skills as pre-reading or surveying, skimming, scanning and intensive study-type reading. Each of these can be approached heuristically, letting students know first-hand what they get and what they miss as they move from skill to skill. By so knowing, they can better select the most appropriate skill combination for any given situation.

With these specialized skills, individual differences tend to stand

out markedly. One student, for example, may be such a superb skimmer that he comprehends better than a poor word-for-word reader. The best scanner may or may not be the best reader. With careful class structuring, such individual differences can still be dealt with effectively.

Another way to individualize instruction is by using a learning resource center. According to October, 1975, figures from the Center for Humanities, Incorporated, the average American watches 1,200 hours of television annually yet reads books for only five hours a year. We can capitalize on that situation in a learning center by using the television medium itself to move students back to books.

Take some new TV teaching aids built around the electronic character-generator, Chiron II, named after the wise, beneficent centaur who taught Achilles, Asclepius and others. It is used in a four-track series of instructional aids for teaching reading, each track containing twelve units. One track provides specific help with vocabulary development, another with perceptual development, a third uses electronically-paced readings focused on psychological principles for the improvement of reading, and a fourth contains additional visual-oriented general instructional help.

Additional breadth comes from selecting still a third vantage point. After all, reading is part of the broad area of communication, which includes writing, speaking, and listening. Remember the book, Why Johnny Can't Read? Recently Newsweek featured an article, "Why Johnny Can't Write," an article which documented a marked decline in student ability to write.

Properly viewed, reading does have relationships with the other communication skills which deserve to be capitalized on. For example, in The Golden Book of Writing, the author says the only way to learn how to write is to "read, read, and read some more." Feeling for the written word does come from extensive exposure to the written word through reading. Knowing and capitalizing on such relationships between reading and the other language arts or communications skills should also underlie the teaching of efficient reading.

The Application

College courses in Efficient Reading should, therefore, be solidly based on student needs and deal broadly with the reading process itself. The final area of concern is that of application.

For adults, no longer in school, reading ceases to be a grade-getting tool, its primary in-school function, according to student opinion. That may explain in large part why the average adult reads a book for only five hours a year. Why should he read books? He is not in school.

Somehow in this last reading course, we must invest reading with the role and function it should properly take for the remainder of life. The future, as Tofler's book Future Shock makes quite evident, is catching us up in overwhelming and shocking change. Who is best able to meet that future maturely and well? An article in The National Observer on futurism advises one to: "Widen your reading. It's probably the best single thing you can do to prepare for the future." Certainly the well-informed individual is better able to deal with problems more effectively, whether they be economic, professional, social, spiritual or highly personal.

In short, if we can teach Efficient Reading in such a way as to generate an undying interest in books and an appreciation of their usefulness in all areas of living, along with the more usual expected objectives, what course that would be! How can interest of that kind be generated? Is it even possible?

Fortunately, interest is highly contagious. We as teachers have only to let our own interest in books shine through to our classes to start our students toward that desired goal. We can, of course, speed the process by serving as liaison between student and book--the right book for the right student at the right time.

As one last extension of breadth, making the course even more useful, we can try to teach efficient reading in such a way as to make certain general truths about life appear. For example, a heuristic approach to reading may be structured so as to suggest its usefulness with problems completely removed from reading. In that way, students may be led from a too-accepting attitude to a much more open-minded attitude toward all aspects of life, a tendency to explore and discover truths of all kinds more independently.

That is expecting much from an efficient reading course. But not too much. For those of us who teach such a course, it would seem well worth striving for. Browning puts it so well--"a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for!" We must see needs beyond those already realized or teaching loses both challenge and interest. Why not extend our reach?

[1]Holmes, Jack A., and Harry Singer. "The Substrata Factor Theory: Substrata Factor Differences Underlying Reading Ability in Known Groups at the High School Level," Final Report Covering Contracts 538, SAE 8176 and 538 A, SAE 8660. U. S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1961.

[2]Rosenthal, Robert, and Leonore Jacobson. Pygmalion in the Classroom. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968.